SANATANA DHARMA FAQ

A Few Answers to Some Common Questions About Dharma

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Q. What is the difference between Yoga and Sanatana Dharma?

A. Absolutely none. These are just two terms for the same spiritual tradition. Sanatana Dharma is the world-view and philosophy. While Yoga is Sanatana Dharma in actual practice.

Sadly, when most people hear the word "Yoga", they tend to think in terms of the physical disciplines of Yoga. Yoga is much more than just an effective way to become more flexible, healthy and fit. Yoga is a philosophy, a spiritual path and a world-view. Yoga is a tradition with thousands of years of history, a vast canon of sacred literature, and a lineage of teachers who have guide its development and preserved its teachings for the benefit of modern humanity. Yoga and Sanatana Dharma are one.

Followers of Sanatana Dharma are called Dharmis. If you practice Sanatana Dharma, then you are a Dharmi.

Q. How old is Sanatana Dharma?

A. There are several closely allied opinions on this subject. Scholars of South Asian religions are - at the very least - of the opinion that Sanatana Dharma represents one of the oldest spiritual traditions known to humanity. Many of these scholars go as far as to say that it is probably the oldest spiritual path on earth. Dharmis would certainly agree with this latter view. The oldest writings known to humanity are the Vedas, the revealed scriptures of Sanatana Dharma, and date back to perhaps 3800 B.C.E. This is when they were first put into writing; these sacred scriptures are known, however, to have been transmitted orally from generation to generation for an extensive period of time previous to even this.

Followers of Sanatana Dharma themselves hold the view that this spiritual tradition, known in the ancient, sacred language of Sanskrit as "Sanatana Dharma," is an eternal and ever-present (even if not ever-visible) way of life.

No one actually knows when Sanatana Dharma was first started. Both practitioners of Dharma spirituality, as well as all academicians, agree that there was no one specific time in known history

when the path of Dharma was founded. Additionally, there was no one individual – a prophet, saint or priest - who can be claimed as the founder of the religion. As far as followers themselves are concerned, Sanatana Dharma was never actually founded.

It is an eternal spiritual phenomena that is as old as the Earth herself. Moreover, Dharma (God's Natural Law) is the sustainer of the Earth. This is indicated by the meanings of the two words that constitute the very name of this culture: sanatana means “eternal” and dharma means “natural law."

Sanatana Dharma is a way of life and world-view that is also trans-geographical. Sanatana Dharma do not pertain only to India. Traces of Sanatana Dharma are to be found in many of the ancient cultures of the world. We see ideas and practices that are very similar to Dharma philosophy, not only in ancient India, but also in Chinese culture, Native American, Celtic, Greco-Roman, Egyptian, Mayan, Germanic, Mesopotamian, and Persian cultures, as well as many others. The concept of "Dharma", as the natural law inherent in our cosmos, is found in almost all ancient civilizations. In Chinese, Dharma is translated as "Tao". In Ancient Egyptian, it is known as "Ma'at". In Latin

as "Liga Natura" (Natural Law). In ancient Persian as "Asha". The great Twentieth Century Italian philosopher, Baron Julius Evola, refers to this concept as "Tradition". There is a word for Dharma in almost every ancient language on earth. So when we speak of "Dharma", we are not just referring to some sect, denomination or creed.

Rather, we are referring to those principles that serve as the very foundation of all authentic religious experience.

Q. What's the difference between being a follower of Sanatana Dharma and being Indian? Are they the same thing?

A. No. Being a follower of Sanatana Dharma (a Dharmi) and being Indian are quite different though often the two are unfortunately confused as being the same. Sanatana Dharma is a religion; being Indian is an ethnicity. Very simply, just like Catholicism is a religion, while being Irish is a nationality, in the exact same way, Sanatana Dharma is a religion tradition, while being Indian is a nationality. Not every ethnic Indian is necessarily a follower of Sanatana Dharma or Yoga. One will find Indians who are Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Jewish or even atheists.

Conversely, not every person who practices Dharma spirituality is necessarily of Indian ancestry.

There are American Dharmis, Canadian Dharmis, British Dharmis, Russian Dharmis, Japanese Dharmis, Mexican Dharmis, Iranian Dharmis, Indonesian Dharmis, etc.

The followers of Sanatana Dharma and Yoga are represented by almost every race, nationality, language and ethnic group in the world. Today, there are at least one billion people who identify themselves to one degree or another as followers of Sanatana Dharma. Sanatana Dharma is a philosophy, a spiritual culture, a world-view and a way of life that is open to, and welcoming of, all people without discrimination. Regardless of your race, nationality, ethnicity, gender or language, you are welcome to practice Sanatana Dharma.

Q. How many followers of Sanatana Dharma are there in the world?

A. There are close to one billion followers of Sanatana Dharma in the world today. The majority of these Dharmis live in South Asia - India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, etc.

Approximately 85% of the population of India are followers. However, Dharmis can be found living happily in almost every country on earth. There are about 3 million people currently practicing Sanatana Dharma, for example, living in the U.S.

Interestingly, not every American who practices Sanatana Dharma, however, is necessarily consciously aware of the fact that they are following the ancient tradition of Sanatana Dharma. At least 3 million people in the U.S. do consciously identify themselves as followers of Sanatana Dharma. Of these 3 million American followers, about 1.5 million are of Indian descent. The other 1.5 million are non-Indian American practitioners.

Q. Do those who practice Dharma spirituality follow a set of scriptures?

A. Absolutely! In fact the very definition of a follower of Sanatana Dharma and Yoga is one who accepts the teachings and guidance of the revealed scriptures of Sanatana Dharma. The canon of sacred scriptures that guide Sanatana Dharma and Yoga is known as the Veda. The word “Veda” itself comes from the Sanskrit verb root "vid" and literally means “to know." The Vedic literature is

the most ancient writing in world history and is composed of a vast library of beautifully written texts devoted to a wide array of subjects including: philosophy, theology, sacred arts, medicine, architecture, ancient sciences, politics, economics, social science, and sacred stories (divya-katha).

Of all these many ancient and intriguing writings, the most famous in the West is probably the Bhagavad Gita. When J. Robert Oppenheimer, the inventor of the atomic bomb, first witnessed the power of the first atomic explosion, in awe he quoted a verse of the famous Bhagavad Gita: "Time am I, the destroyer of all worlds." In addition to the Bhagavad Gita, the most important sacred texts in the Dharma tradition include the Yoga Sutras, Narayana Upanishad, Narada Bhakti Sutras, Lakshmi Tantra and Yoga Rahasya, among others. Sincere followers of Sanatana Dharma use the immense wisdom of these sacred texts as guides to successful living.

Myth: Followers of Sanatana Dharma worship cows.

Fact: Actually, Dharmis respect all forms of life. Indeed, one of the major tenets of Sanatana Dharma is known as ahimsa, or non-violence.

Rather than just being limited to the human population, the Dharma concept of non-violence extends itself to all the living beings who inhabit God's creation, whether they be humans or animals. For this reason, Sanatana Dharma teaches the positive lifestyle of vegetarianism and respect for the earth. Cows serve a highly symbolic function in our tradition. In the same way that a fish symbolizes the highest belief of the Christian faith, or the crescent moon represents Islam, the cow is simply representative of the life-affirming teachings of Dharma. Cows represent the sacredness of motherhood and the abundance of God's creation. As a sacred symbol, followers of Sanatana Dharma respect cows and try to protect them from harm; we don't worship cows any more than Christians worship fish, or Muslims worship the moon!

Myth: Followers of Sanatana Dharma are idol worshipers.

Fact: Followers of Sanatana Dharma are not idol worshipers. We do, however, employ sacred imagery in our worship, and as focus points to concentrate on during meditation. These sacred images can be in the form of a statue, a portrait, or a mandala or yantra. A similar use of sacred

imagery is found in almost every other religion on earth. This practice is similar to how Catholics venerate statues of saints, Protestants pray at the cross and Muslims pray toward the Ka'aba. Followers of Sanatana Dharma are certainly intelligent to understand that the Unlimited ultimately cannot be fully expressed in a limited statue or image. Simultaneously, however, if God truly is omnipresent and omnipotent, then He certainly has the ability to make Himself present in a sacred image if He so chooses. Moreover, if God is truly merciful and good, then He would want to choose to make Himself as accessible to His devotees as possible. Such is the grace of God. It is with this understanding in mind that followers of Sanatana Dharma engage in the ancient science of archana-seva, or deity worship. The practice of employing sacred imagery is a very powerful tool for showing our devotion to God, for meditation, and for making spiritual progress. This fact is actually acknowledged and practiced by most of the world’s religions. Followers of Sanatana Dharma are, therefore, not “idol worshipers".

Myth: Sanatana Dharma is a polytheistic spiritual tradition. They worship many gods, not the one supreme God.

Fact: Sanatana Dharma is not in any way a polytheistic spiritual tradition. Rather, Sanatana Dharma teaches a form of panentheistic monotheism. We believe that God is one, transcendent, yet fully immanent and present in all things perceivable and conceivable. For all followers of Sanatana Dharma, there is only one, ultimate, supreme God.

This God is the one Supreme Lord - the ontological source and foundation of all subjective and objective reality. In a similar way in which other religions believe in a multitude of divine beings, sometimes known as angels, divinities, gods, etc., followers of Sanatana Dharma believe that our universe is alive with beneficent beings, called devas in the ancient Sanskrit language. These devas, however, are all servants of the one Supreme Lord, and are never to be mistakenly confused with the Supreme Lord. While followers of Sanatana Dharma respect these devas, and even propitiate them in times of need, we also readily acknowledge that these devas, too, have their origin and sustenance in the one Supreme Lord. God is known as Narayana for followers of Dharma spirituality.

The name Narayana means "The Sustainer of All Beings".

Followers of Sanatana Dharma are thus panentheistic monotheists, worshipers of one supreme God, in every sense of the word. Sanatana Dharma is not in any way a polytheistic tradition.

Myth: Sanatana Dharma tends to be very “mystical;" it is not a world-view that stresses reason and philosophy.

Fact: Actually, Sanatana Dharma represents a very systematic and deeply rational world-view. Sanatana Dharma is a tradition that is based upon the two complimentary tools of rationality and practical experience. Both reason and personal spiritual experience are necessary to make real spiritual advancement. Without reason and discernment, spirituality becomes fanatical and sentimental. But without practical experience of the Divine, spirituality can become dry and theoretical. Dharma spirituality unites intellect and experience in the service of knowing Truth. The long history of Sanatana Dharma includes many vivid examples of the most intellectually challenging philosophers, thinkers and scholars known to humanity. Some of these great philosophers include: Patanjali,

Gautama, Vyasa, Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Vedanta Deshika, Vijnana Bhikshu, and countless others. Whether speaking of metaphysics, epistemology, ontology, ethics, psychology, literary criticism, poetry, aesthetics, logic, or propositional analysis, there is no idea, concept or world-view of importance that has not been debated and thoroughly explored by traditional Vedic philosophical texts.

Historically, there are allied seven schools of philosophy in the tradition of Sanatana Dharma. These include Nyaya (the school of logic and epistemology), Samkhya (speculative physics), Vedanta (metaphysical ontology), Vaisheshika (phenomenal ontology), Vyakarana (linguistics), Mimamsa (causality and cosmology), and Yoga itself.

Thus, Sanatana Dharma is far from an un-intellectual tradition.

Myth: Dharmis all sleep on beds of nails.

Fact: Um...no.

How Can I Become a Follower of Sanatana Dharma?

Glad you asked! You may actually be one already...and just don't know it. There are approximately three-million people who are conscious followers of Sanatana Dharma currently residing in the United States. About half of those are of South Asian (Indian) ethnic heritage. The other half are non-Indian Americans who accept and practice the teachings of Sanatana Dharma. Unfortunately, even though most of these 1.5 million non-Indian Americans follow the practices of Sanatana Dharma, believe in many of the most important teachings of Sanatana Dharma, even have gurus (spiritual teachers) and Sanskrit names, despite all these facts, many do not necessarily consciously identify themselves with Sanatana Dharma. The main reason being that these American Dharmis simply do not know that they are part of an ancient and wonderful tradition.

It is our hope that Dharma Central will prove to be a helpful resource for many of these "HIDDEN HINDUS" to better understand, appreciate and to begin to consciously practice the wonderful spiritual tradition that they are currently following unconsciously. Here is a test to know if you are already a follower of Sanatana Dharma, and are possibly just not consciously aware of it:

1. Do you practice any form of Yoga?

2. Are you a vegetarian?

3. Do you read the Bhagavad Gita, or other Vedic literature often?

4. Do you practice meditation?

5. Do you believe in the process of karma and reincarnation?

If your answer to these questions is Yes!, then congratulations!; you are already following Sanatana Dharma. You are a Dharmi!